

Bethel Baptist Church¹

200 S. 22nd Street
Monroe, La.

Parent: None

Founder: Charity Club No. 2

Year: 1919

Longest Pastorate: The Reverend Cornelius C. Bowie, 31 years 1919 to 1950

Number of Pastors 1919-2014: Eight

The Bethel Baptist Church began in May of 1919 in the aftermath of a revival conducted by Charity Club No. 2. In that revival, seven persons were baptized. Shortly after a church was formed and the

Reverend Cornelius C. Bowie was named Pastor.²

Among the first members were: Monroe Levels, Dan Uester, Charlotte Johnson, Julius DeGrate, Walter Bowie, Willie Johnson, Elbert Armstrong and Jeff Reed.

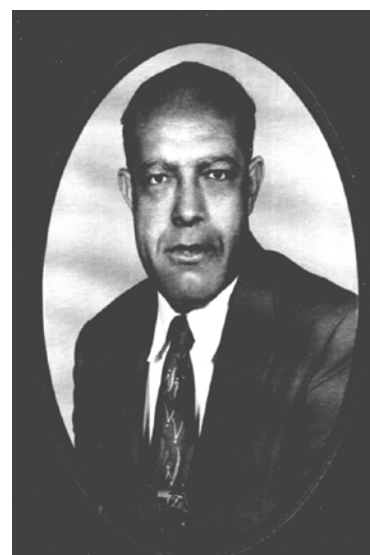
In 1920 a revival was conducted with The Reverend Prince Cornelius Keal as the evangelist. Several additional people joined the congregation.

The Reverend Bowie served as pastor for 31 years between 1919 and February 7, 1950 when he died.

In the same year, The Reverend Joe P. Reed was elected pastor. During his tenure the church was remodeled. In 1953 he resigned.

In 1953 the Reverend W.H. Himes was elected pastor. For eleven years Pastor Himes led the congregation in a great expansion that resulted in more than 400 new members and construction of a new building in the Renwick neighborhood.

In preparation for the expansion, the church was incorporated on October 23, 1956.³ The incorporators said the purpose of the corporation was to: "Erect church buildings, Sunday School buildings and other appropriate structures in which to worship God, and to preach and teach the religion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ according to the faith and practice and tenets of a Baptist Church, and in accordance with the discipline and rules of a Baptist Church; and to buy, hold and own land for the erection of parsonages for the use and occupancy thereof by ministers in charge of the congregation."⁴ The Bethel Corporation is managed by a Board of Trustees that is set to be elected on or before the first Monday of January of each year. The first officers were: Henry Stewart, chairman; Johnny



Rev. W.H. Himes

¹ Bethel Baptist Church 1919-1987, Past, Present, Future, An Official Church History included in the 68th Anniversary Program published November 15, 1987.

² The Reverend Bowie was not an ordained minister at the time. According Official Church History included in the 68th Anniversary Program published November 15, 1987 he went to Newellton, Louisiana to obtain ordination and returned to accept the pastorate.

³ Articles of Incorporation of the Bethel Baptist Church, Ouachita Parish Clerk of Court Records, filed October 24, 1956. File #420909.

⁴ **IBID**, P. 351

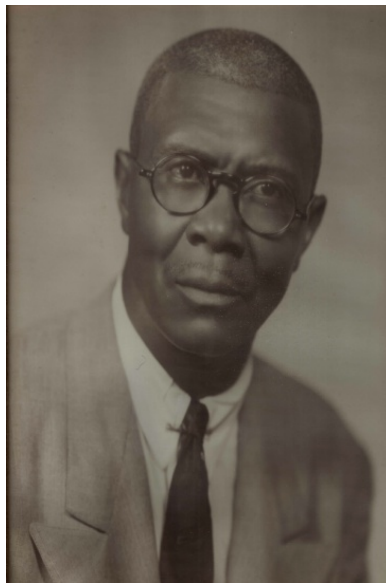
Caraway, vice-chairman; Mrs. Emma Stewart, secretary; Allen Jamison, treasurer; James Tolliver, Gus Moore and Elijah Harris.⁵ The life of the corporation would extend to 2055.

As the membership grew, the members saw the need for a larger place of worship than its Wood Street edifice. Four lots of land were purchased for \$2,250 and work proceeded toward building a new church. In December of 1959 ground breaking ceremonies were held. Six months later 23,062 bricks were purchased and placed on the site and the construction of the church began at a price of \$48,000. On July 7, 1960 the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new edifice was held.

The Reverend Himes preached his last sermon on June 21, 1964 from the text, "Stand Anyhow." That Sunday he sang, "When I get to the Jordan Stream, Oh Lord Remember me."



Rev. Lonnie B. Jackson



Rev. E.E. Eddy

The next day, June 22, 1964, he died.⁶

The Reverend Frederick D. Perkins served as interim pastor. He was followed by The Reverend E. E. Eddy who was elected in 1965. During his two year tenure, five deacons were crowned along with three deaconesses, and many members were added.

In March 1968 the Reverend Lonnie Bruce Jackson was elected pastor.⁷

The Reverend Jackson presided over an era of peace and cooperation. He constantly told members "We don't have to fall out with the church because we

don't agree on issues." His first church meeting was one hour. It was the shortest business meeting in the church's history. Pastor Jackson is credited with changing the way business was handled at Bethel by bringing recommendations from the Pastor and Board of Deacons rather than from the pulpit or from the business floor.

Under The Reverend Jackson church dues were raised from \$1.50 a month to \$5.00 a month. Combined with other efforts the church's debt was eliminated in five years and four months. In addition, hundreds of members were added under Pastor Jackson's administration, many of them professionals and community leaders. Facility improvements were also made including the

⁵ **IBID**, P. 352

⁶ **Official Obituary of the Reverend W.H. Himes:** "Reverend Himes was born to Arthor and Mary Himes April 10, 1915 at Saint Joseph, Louisiana. He became a Christian at the age of 10 and joined the Lakewood Baptist Church in St. Joseph, Louisiana. In 1939 he moved to Bastrop, Louisiana and became a member of the Ivory Chapel Baptist Church under the leadership of Reverend Morris. He began ministry in 1935 and was ordained in 1937 by Reverend Campbell. Reverend Himes also spent several years in the United States Army. Two of his favorite songs were: When I come to the end of my journey and "I trust in God." His funeral oration was preached by Rev. Joe Williams. Dr. Prince Cornelius Keal was the master of ceremonies

⁷ *The Reverend Lonnie Bruce Jackson* was elected pastor in March of 1968 but did not begin his pastorate until June. In the interim, his father pastored Bethel until he could fulfill his commitment to another church where he served as pastor.

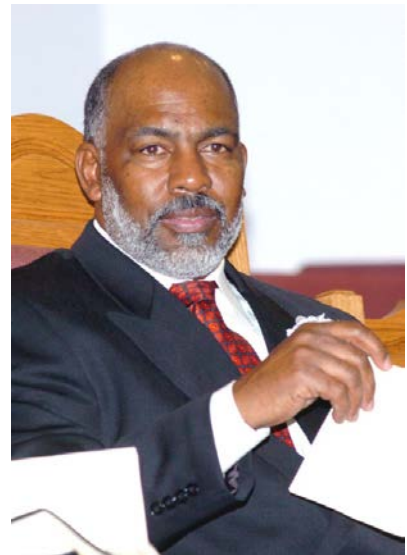
purchase of furniture for the pastor's study, new equipment for the secretary's office, window air conditioners were installed along with a central heating and air unit, roof repaired and several other improvements that included the purchase of an organ, carpet for the floors, glass doors and



Rev. James Howard



Rev. Charles Thomas



Rev. Reuben Oliver

interior remodeling.

The Reverend Jackson and the deacons were a cohesive group of church leaders, never dissenting before the membership, enjoying unprecedented harmony and love. The Reverend Jackson was known for saying, "You can't come between me and my deacons."⁸

On November 11, 1982, The Reverend Jackson died after preaching a revival service at the Piney Grove Baptist Church. He served as pastor of Bethel for 14 years.⁹

The Reverend Jackson was also the mayor of Lake Providence and commuted between Monroe and Lake Providence on a regular basis. He also pastored the Lone Wa Baptist Church in Monroe. In many ways the two churches functioned as sister churches under his leadership. Politically astute, The Reverend Jackson led Bethel to become the center of political activity during the early 70's as local blacks became involved in the electoral process. Many of Bethel's members were instrumental in electing African-Americans to political offices and influencing others to help the Black Community. Among those who broke barriers during this time were: Donnis McDowell, a secretary to the District Attorney and Alfred Blakes who rose to

⁸ **A Bethel Baptist Church History**, From Bush Arbor to A House of God, Eighty Years of Progress. A revised history of

Bethel Baptist Church prepared by Lorraine Slacks. November 14, 1999

⁹ **Jackson, Rev. Lonnie Bruce**. "Obituary Notes", *Official Obituary of the Reverend Lonnie Bruce Jackson*: In the personal files of Roosevelt Wright, Jr., Monroe, La. Notes: "Dr. Jackson was born to Granville Jackson, Sr. and Lorean Jackson on October 10, 1946 in Tallulah, Louisiana. He attended the public schools of Tallulah, Louisiana and graduated from McCall Senior High School with honors. He attended Grambling State University where he met his future wife, the former Sandra F. Harris. Sandra and Bruce were married on August 18, 1967 in Lake Providence where they maintained a residence at 509 Scarbough. They were blessed with three beautiful children: L. B. Jackson, Jr. 14; Joseph Granville Jackson, 13; and beautiful Nina Michelle Jackson, 3. Dr. Jackson was renown as a minister of the gospel, a statesman and a humanitarian. He confessed Christ at the early age of 5 and was baptized by the Reverend G. C. Carr at the age of 8 and began his ministry shortly thereafter. His first pastorate was at the Union Baptist Church in Wilton, Louisiana at the age of 15.

prominence as the head of the Fifth District Black Caucus. Most of this activity emanated out of the Bethel Congregation under Reverend Jackson's leadership.

The Reverend Christopher Van Rodgers conducted services for Bethel in the interim. He was the full time pastor of the Zion Traveler Baptist Church at the time. He kept the grieving congregation together until The Reverend James Howard was elected pastor on September 8, 1983.

Under Pastor Howard's four year tenure, several improvements were made to the sanctuary, new chairs were purchased, the choir stand was enlarged and a marquis was installed. He also increased home visitations of the membership as well as revitalized the Sunday school, Mission and Bible class attendance.¹⁰ In January of 1987 Pastor Howard resigned after three years and four months.

On August 10, 1987 The Reverend Charles Thomas from Gary Indiana was elected pastor. He had recently conducted a revival for the congregation and was recruited by the Board of Deacons and search committee to serve as pastor. His first sermon as pastor was, "We hang our harps on a Weeping Willow Tree" from Psalm 137:2-4. Shortly after, he crowned two deacons: Ross Slacks and Carey Jones. He encouraged tithing and prayer during his administration.

Under The Reverend Thomas' leadership several sons of the house were ordained, a building fund was established and a church motto was coined, "Catch the vision." He crowned new deacons and led the church in refurbishing the church furniture, the pulpit furniture and purchasing a new sound system.¹¹

The Reverend Reuben L. Oliver was elected pastor of Bethel in 1996. He was the former pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church. He reorganized the structure of the Christian Education Department and focused on the youth department as well. He led the church in upgrading its technological capabilities by computerizing the business office and recarpeted the sanctuary. In addition a male chorus was formed, the ushering ministry was upgraded and a back to school revival was initiated for students.¹²

Pastor Oliver also led the congregation in construction of a family life center located on the church grounds.

¹⁰ **IBID.** Slacks history

¹¹ IBID, Slacks history

¹² IBID, Slacks history.